

VZCZCXYZ0000
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHYN #2030/01 3081502
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
R 041502Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3157
INFO RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 1691
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SANAA 002030

NOFORN
SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR JYAPHE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2019
TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SA'ADA: HOUTHIS PUSH OUTWARD, THOUSANDS OF
CIVILIANS TRAPPED

REF: SANAA 2029

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. The vast majority of Sa'ada governorate appears to be under Houthi control, including much of western Sa'ada, where the rebels took Razeh's military airport; northwestern Sa'ada; and eastern Sa'ada, where they have opened a new front. One exception is Sa'ada City, most of which the ROYG controls, except for a part of the walled historic quarter. Despite heavy fighting over strategic areas, neither side appears to have significantly advanced, and as the war approaches its fourth month, most observers conclude that neither side is winning. Relief agencies believe that aid donated for the people of Sa'ada from private individuals and businesses in Yemen is being diverted to the military and onto the market. As the fighting spreads, aid delivery routes may be further restricted and civilians will increasingly be caught in the crossfire, as neither the ROYG nor the Houthis is taking the necessary precautions to protect civilians. END SUMMARY.

GROUND-TRUTHING FROM RELIEF AGENCIES

12. (C) Finding out the ground truth about the war in Sa'ada is extremely difficult. Mobile phones are blocked, and journalists and NGOs are denied access to the governorate. (Note: Rajeh Badi of al-Sahwa and Samir Jubran of al-Masdar told EmbOff on November 3 that they have four incognito correspondents in Sa'ada governorate who are able to report from the field. End Note.) The official media reports daily ROYG victories, and President Saleh told the Ambassador on October 26 that "we are winning every day." However, the Houthis claim victories over the same areas, often providing video clips as evidence. Helping to make sense of these confusing and contradictory accounts are the UN and local relief agencies that have some access to the war-torn governorate and a limited ability to communicate what they see to the outside world. On November 3 and 4, representatives of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP), respectively, provided PolOff an assessment of the war in Sa'ada that substantially contradicts the official picture.

SA'ADA CITY: CIVILIANS CAUGHT IN CROSSFIRE

13. (C) According to WFP Representative Gian Carlo Cirri, the ROYG controls most of Sa'ada City, but it is a "very volatile, very fluid" situation. The frontline's distance from the city ranges from 500 meters to two kilometers. It's a crescent-shaped front that hugs the western limit of the city, but the Houthis are able to enter the city almost every

day. On several occasions there has been fighting in the Republican Palace, the symbol of central government power. Cirri said there is also a front within Sa'ada City itself: The historic walled quarter known as the "old city" is a Houthi stronghold, but it is surrounded by government forces and the two parties regularly exchange fire.

¶4. (C) In the al-Sam IDP camp on the outskirts of Sa'ada City, which houses about 200 families (between 1000 and 1400 people), UNHCR reported that Yemeni civilians were killed and wounded on October 29 when a rocket or a mortar round landed in the camp. Claire Bourgeois, UNHCR Representative, told PolOff on November 2 that the ROYG had parked an army tank next to the IDP camp in response to reports that the Houthis were gathering on the other side of the camp and possibly infiltrating it. While the circumstances are unclear, it appears that the ROYG then fired across the camp and a rocket or mortar round landed inside it, killing two civilians, severely injuring two others -) one of whom later died -) and wounding nine children. Bourgeois said both parties are responsible for failing to take precautions to protect civilians caught in the cross-fire. "The fact is, the camp is there and no one asked them to leave" or tried to evacuate them, she said.

EASTERN SA'ADA: NEW FRONT OPENS, AID CONVOYS BLOCKED

¶5. (C) Cirri reported the Houthis have opened up a new front in the war in eastern Sa'ada governorate. That part of the governorate had been relatively accessible as a thoroughfare for aid deliveries because of the lack of fighting. Cirri's account of a new eastern front was corroborated by Ahmed

al-Haj, AP correspondent in Yemen, who told PolOff on October 27 that during the previous week the Houthis had closed off the eastern routes into Sa'ada governorate because the army was using them to resupply. Cirri is concerned that fighting on the new eastern front will completely cut the main humanitarian supply line into Sa'ada. He told PolOff that for nearly three weeks, the government blocked a joint WFP-UNHCR convoy of five aid trucks from passing through al-Boque. The trucks were finally allowed to pass on October 31. WFP is exploring alternate routes for aid delivery in case that route is closed again.

NW SA'ADA: CIVILIANS TRAPPED BETWEEN HOUTHIS AND BORDER

¶6. (C) Cirri reported that for the past four weeks, Baqim district in northwestern Sa'ada has been under Houthi control. As a result, IDPs were pushed further north, and according to Bourgeois, there are now approximately 7,000 IDPs stranded in seven settlements, scattered in an area two kilometers from the Saudi border and less than seven kilometers from Houthi territory. Cirri said the Houthis have displaced local tribal authorities throughout northern Sa'ada. WFP successfully delivered a convoy of food from Sana'a through Saudi Arabia to reach the IDPs sandwiched in that area.

NOT ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

¶7. (C) According to Cirri, the area west of Sa'ada City is the "natural, ancestral" home of the Zaydis and therefore a Houthi stronghold. The Houthis have recently expanded further westward, taking Razeh district. Local media and the Houthis reported that the Houthis took the military airport there, along with a large cache of weapons and munitions. Melika Faim, Deputy Director of Operations for Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), told PolOff on October 21 that during the battle for control of the district, an MSF-hospital was hit while patients and staff were inside. Bourgeois and Cirri said that the army is trying to re-take the area. According to Bourgeois, there have been reports of an additional 20 civilians killed and 25 to 30 injured, mostly in their homes, during the course of the fighting.

¶8. (C) Who controls Malahidh district, south of Razez, is much less clear. According to Cirri, Malahidh is "more under Houthi control than government control," and Bourgeois believes that Malahidh is "absolutely controlled" by the Houthis. GPC newspaper Al-Mutamarr reported on November 1 that the "military and security units launched a large-scale offensive" there, possibly to re-take it. But Bourgeois denied that the offensive was occurring, explaining that the staff and residents in Mazraq IDP camp, south of Malahidh, can hear the bombing in Malahidh, and "right now they're not hearing anything." However, other observers report that the ROYG gained control of parts of Malahidh, cornering the Houthis by the Saudi border; the Houthi then attacked Saudi border guards in the Jabal al-Dukhan mountain area (reftel).

NO PRECAUTIONS TO PROTECT CIVILIANS

¶9. (C) A major concern of humanitarian relief agencies is that neither the ROYG nor the Houthis take any precautionary measures to protect civilians who might be caught in the crossfire. Bourgeois said that on only one occasion, in Harf Sufyan in August, did the authorities warn the local population to evacuate because of imminent fighting. She is not aware that either side has issued warnings since.

SUSPICIONS OF AID DIVERSION

¶10. (C) Gareth Richards, Country Director of Care International Yemen, told PolOff on November 2 he suspects the "massive mobilization" of aid within Yemen is being diverted to military bases and onto the market. (Note: This is not aid distributed by UN agencies or international NGOs, but aid donations from citizens and businesses of Yemen "for the people of Sa'ada." PolOff observed a fleet of trucks parked outside the Saleh Mosque in central Sana'a being loaded with aid donations for Sa'ada. President Saleh also referred to this popular mobilization when he met with the Ambassador on October 26. End Note.) Yet Richards said no one is tracking these private donations, coordinating their distribution, or ensuring that the aid is getting to the real

victims of the war. Cirri agreed these donations "are not very transparent," raising concerns that the ROYG will use them for its own benefit. Bourgeois reported that on October 22, one such aid convoy drove northward through the Mazraq IDP camp in order to reach a military base on the other side. The IDPs in the camp rioted because they thought the aid was intended for them. Conversely, the ROYG is so concerned that aid may end up going to Houthi fighters that it is hindering aid deliveries from UNHCR, WFP, and their implementing partners, such as in Amran and Al-Jawf governorates, or cutting the daily rations that can be distributed to IDPs in half, as in Sa'ada governorate.

PROTRACTED WAR EXPECTED

¶11. (S/NF) Journalist Mohammed al-Qadhi told PolOff on October 30, "In 2004, the Houthis controlled a village, and now they control 80 percent of Sa'ada." Naseem al-Rehman, UNICEF Communications and Advocacy Chief, agreed with that estimate, but noted that the Houthis' territorial gains do not necessarily imply a government loss, since very little of the governorate was ever under central government control. Because of the Houthis' expansion, Cirri expects a "protracted war with an IDP caseload increasing to 200,000" from the current estimate of 150,000. The Central Security Forces reportedly plan to send additional battalions to Sa'ada to clear Houthis from their bases in the old city, but these battalions lack the relevant training (IIR6 906 0026 10), raising concerns that civilians will be caught in the crossfire.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) WFP, UNHCR, other international agencies, and their implementing partners are overcoming numerous obstacles through their determination and creative problem-solving. Because of their efforts, the IDPs who are accessible are receiving life-saving food and non-food items. The accessible IDPs are a fraction of the total population, however, and as the fighting spreads to new fronts, there is a real risk that even fewer IDPs will be able to receive humanitarian aid. Furthermore, intense fighting on several fronts is exposing civilians to danger, and this situation is likely to worsen if the ROYG undertakes a major offensive in Sa'ada City. Post will continue to urge both parties to take all necessary steps to protect civilians affected by the conflict and to agree to localized, time-bound humanitarian ceasefires to allow for access to thousands of civilians trapped by the conflict. END COMMENT.
SECHE